

Exhibition of Islamic Drawings at Harvard's Arthur M. Sackler Museum Explores the Development of the Medium in Islamic Art

"The Tablet and the Pen" showcases works from Turkey, Iran, and India



Mystical Journey (detail), c. 1650. Black ink and opaque watercolor, 12.5 x 25.2 cm. Arthur M. Sackler Museum. Grace Nichols Strong, Francis H. Burr, and Friends of the Fogg Art Museum Funds. Photo: Katya Kallsen © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

CAMBRIDGE, MA (January 13, 2006)—Twenty-eight drawings primarily from the 15th through 18th centuries will be featured in *The Tablet and the Pen: Drawings from the Islamic World*, on display at Harvard's Arthur M. Sackler Museum from February 18 to July 23. The exhibition offers a unique opportunity to understand how the medium of drawing emerged as a powerful and dynamic mode of expression in the eastern Islamic lands. The works exemplify the creative experimentation of Islamic artists in Turkey, Iran, and India through their underdrawings for painted compositions, drawings intended to transfer designs to other media, and finely executed and detailed works on paper that were meant to be autonomous pieces of art in their own right.

"This small but potent exhibition offers a fascinating glimpse into the motivations and mechanisms behind the construction of images in Muslim culture," said Thomas W. Lentz, Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director of the Harvard University Art Museums. "It also involved a great deal of research by students on a significant number of drawings from our collection, giving them the opportunity to reveal new information about material and technique, which in turn has led to a deeper understanding of artistic process and sources of inspiration for this unique visual tradition."

The Tablet and the Pen was organized by two doctoral candidates in the history of art and architecture, Ladan Akbarnia and Chanchal Dadlani, in coordination with Mary McWilliams, Norma Jean Calderwood Curator of Islamic Art at the Harvard University Art Museums, and David J. Roxburgh, professor of the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University. Akbarnia and Dadlani attribute the exhibition's name to the centrality of the tablet and the pen in the Islamic idea of creation, saying "The *Qur'an* states that God's first creation was the pen, and that all existence was written with the pen on the 'safely-preserved' tablet." As early as the 16th century, Muslim writers associated the various traditions of Islamic art with this moment of creation and recognized the importance of *tasvīr*, an Arabic term for the act of "depiction."

Works on display

The exhibition includes exquisite works from Harvard's own holdings, as well as four drawings loaned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, from the prestigious collection assembled by Viktor Goloubew. Goloubew (1879–1945) was a connoisseur and scholar at the Ecole de l'Extrême Orient. Most of the drawings were created under the Safavid dynasty in Iran (1501–1732), but there are also examples from the Timurid dynasty in Iran and Central Asia (1370–1506), the Ottoman dynasty in Turkey (1299–1922), the Mughal dynasty in India (1520–1857), and the Qajar dynasty in Iran (1779–1942).

A particularly fine work, *Mystical Journey* (Iran, c. 1650), is a chaotic-looking swirl of ink dervishes, animals, and insects on marbled paper. Technical analysis by Craigen Bowen, deputy director of the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, revealed that the composition was not random, as had been thought. Instead, microscopic examination made it clear that the artist had incorporated and drawn inspiration from the swirling forms created during the process of marbling the paper.

Among the MFA drawings on display will be *A Peri with a Flask*, executed in black ink and opaque watercolor on paper sometime during the second half of the 16th century in Ottoman Turkey or Safavid Iran. This work is distinguished by its delicacy and remarkable detail and

shows a *peri*, a winged spirit beloved in Iranian and Turkish folklore, holding a flask that depicts a fantastic bird similar to the Chinese phoenix.

“These drawings show a freshness, vivacity, and experimental quality that one wouldn’t see in a painting,” said McWilliams. “By the 17th century, people in the Islamic world had come to appreciate drawings as a stand-alone art form.”

***The Tablet and the Pen* a collaborative effort**

This exhibition is an example of the collaboration that the Art Museums encourage between its curators and the faculty and students in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture. Both student curators are preparing their dissertations under the supervision of Roxburgh, an expert in Islamic art. Akbarnia has an interest in the Chinese influence on art in Iran and Central Asia during the 13th through 15th centuries and the development of that theme in later drawings. Dadlani is a specialist on the Mughal period in India.

The students were able to select and study the drawings for the exhibition and to closely examine the works under magnification and ultraviolet light with conservators at the Harvard University Art Museums and the MFA. “We examined each of the drawings in detail, from the finest to the most richly textured lines, and began to understand how pen and brush were used to execute these compositions,” said Dadlani. “This allowed us to truly consider how artists explored and exploited the qualities of this particular medium.” Akbarnia adds, “If visitors leave with a clearer sense of the great skill displayed by the artists in these drawings, as well as a basic understanding of the technical aspects and challenges of the medium, they will have an appreciation of the comprehensive nature of Islamic drawing, and ultimately, of its great value in the field of Islamic art.”

Funding for the exhibition has been provided by Melvin R. Seiden, the Arthur Urbane Dilley 1897 and Theron Johnson Damon 1905 Fund for Islamic Art and Culture, the Eric Schroeder Fund, and the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture.

Exhibition Programming

Gallery Talks:

Arthur M. Sackler Museum

Free with the price of admission.

Sunday, February 26, 2:00 p.m.

*Ladan Akbarnia and Chanchal Dadlani, Ph.D. candidates,
History of Art and Architecture and co-curators of the exhibition*

Saturday, March 11, 10:30 a.m.

Saturday, April 8, 11:30 a.m.

Ladan Akbarnia

Saturday, May 6, 11:30 a.m.

David J. Roxburgh, Professor of History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University

The Harvard University Art Museums

The Harvard University Art Museums are one of the world's leading arts institutions, with the Arthur M. Sackler, Busch-Reisinger, and Fogg art museums, the Straus Center for Conservation, the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, the HUAM Archives, and the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis, in Turkey.

The Harvard University Art Museums are distinguished by the range and depth of their collections, their groundbreaking exhibitions, and the original research of their staff. As an integral part of the Harvard community, the three art museums and four research centers serve as resources for all students, adding a special dimension to their areas of study. The public is welcome to experience the collections and exhibitions as well as to enjoy lectures, symposia, and other programs.

For more than a century, the Harvard University Art Museums have been the nation's premier training ground for museum professionals and scholars and are renowned for their role in the development of the discipline of art history in this country.

Location and Hours

The Fogg Art Museum and the Busch-Reisinger Museums are located at 32 Quincy Street, Cambridge. The Arthur M. Sackler Museum is located next door at 485 Broadway. Each museum is a short walk from the Harvard Square MBTA station.

Hours are Monday through Saturday, 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Sunday 1:00–5:00 p.m.; closed on national holidays. Admission is \$7.50; \$6 for seniors; \$6 for students; and free for those under 18 years of age. The Art Museums are free to everyone on Saturday mornings, 10:00 a.m.–noon. The Harvard University Art Museums receive support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. More detailed information is available at 617-495-9400 or on the Internet at www.artmuseums.harvard.edu.

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